

**CROSS-BORDER MOBILITY OF SELF-INITIATED AND ORGANIZATIONAL EXPATRIATES:  
EVIDENCE FROM LARGE-SCALE DATA ON WORK HISTORIES**

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## **Cross-border Mobility of Self-Initiated and Organizational Expatriates: Evidence from Large-scale Data on Work Histories**

**Abstract:** *Globalization in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries is thought to be marked by an increase in cross-border mobility of the highly skilled. Though self-initiated expatriation is a widespread phenomenon, it has received relatively little attention. Furthermore, large-scale studies that track self-initiated and organizational expatriates together, over time and across geographies are noticeably absent from the literature. Consequently, our understanding of these two forms of mobility is relatively limited. This study, which is the first large-scale analysis of the trends and patterns of OE and SIE mobility attempts to fill this gap by analyzing the mobility patterns of 55,915 highly skilled individuals who have made 76,660 cross-border moves between 1990 and 2006. Specifically, we analyze patterns of geographic mobility and then examine the rate, duration, and direction of self-initiated and organizational expatriation over time. Finally, we consider demographic differences in mobility.*

Cross-border mobility of the highly skilled is thought to be on the rise (Solimano 2006; OECD 2008; Defoort 2008). Given the global nature of supply chains, information flows, financial markets, and transactions of goods and services, it is almost inevitable that skilled labor is becoming increasingly global in scope. While skilled professionals are a small segment of the internationally mobile labor force, they are key engines of the global knowledge economy (Ewers 2007), sometimes referred to as the “best and the brightest” (Batalova and Lowell 2007). Skilled human capital fosters knowledge creation, diffusion, innovation, and high-quality service. It also stimulates foreign direct investment, thereby generating greater economic activity (Birkinshaw 2005). Consequently, both countries and firms are increasingly competing to attract and retain talent as a strategy for economic and social development (Bauer and Kunze 2004; Ready, Hill, and Conger 2008) and they will likely continue to do so.

In the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, global mobility of the highly skilled has gone through significant transformations, mainly due to the changing labor demands in developed countries, the integration of the global economy and the creation of trading blocs, especially in Europe. Due to these transformations, there is a lack of understanding of two primary forms of cross-border mobility: self-initiated expatriation (SIE) and organizational expatriation (OE). Research on self-initiated expatriates (SIEs) has traditionally been largely policy-driven and macro in scope, usually examining structural determinants and consequences of migration patterns (Favell, Feldblum, and Smith 2006; see, e.g., Docquier and Marfouk 2006; Beine, Docquier, and Rapoport 2008). Studies of organizational expatriates (OEs) have largely focused on micro-level issues related to traditional expatriation (see Harvey and Moeller 2009; Takeuchi 2010, for recent reviews). Recently, some studies have begun to examine SIE in conjunction with OE (e.g., Jokinen, Brewster, and Suutari 2008; Cerdin and Pargneux 2010; Doherty, Dickmann, and Mills 2011; Biemann and Andresen 2010; Andresen, Biemann, and Pattie 2012), but large-scale studies that track these two forms of mobility together, over time and in

relation to domestic job mobility are noticeably absent. Consequently, our understanding of OE and SIE across firms, geographies, and time periods is relatively limited. For example, while the conventional wisdom suggests that the rate of cross-border mobility has increased over the past 20 years (OECD 2008; Defoort 2008), we do not know whether this growth surpasses that of domestic job mobility. Similarly, while OE has received considerable attention as the strong stream of literature on expatriation indicates (see Collings and Scullion 2012 for a recent review), we know relatively little about how this form of mobility may have changed over time, especially in relation to broader mobility trends.

Our large-scale empirical investigation of organizational and self-initiated expatriation should shed light on the changing nature of cross-border mobility. Specifically, we analyze global mobility of 55,915 highly skilled individuals who have made 76,660 cross-border moves between 1990 and 2006. We track SIE and OE over an extended period and across geographies and analyze them in relation to domestic job mobility. About half the individuals in our sample are from advanced economies, especially EU-15 countries, and the other half are from peripheral economies. EU-15 countries are the destination of over 80 percent of the cross-border moves and 38 percent are within EU-15 countries. However, because Europe, as a whole, is the second largest destination (after the United States and Canada) for the highly skilled (Docquier and Marfouk 2006),<sup>1</sup> our data, which also captures the mobility of individuals from peripheral economies to EU-15 countries and vice-versa, represent a significant opportunity to explore global mobility.

As this study is the first large-scale analysis of the trends and patterns of OE and SIE mobility, it was designed to be explanatory rather than confirmatory. Thus, this article explores the following research questions:

- 1) To what extent has cross-border mobility of the highly skilled increased over time compared with domestic job mobility?

- 2) To what extent has SIE increased over time compared with organizational expatriation?

Alternatively, to what extent has OE declined?

- 3) To what extent have SIE and OE mobility patterns become more temporary (decreased in duration; increased in short-term mobility) and serial (increased mobility to third countries; repeated mobility)?

While there is no definitive definition of “highly skilled” workers (Auriol and Sexton 2002; Batalova and Lowell 2007; Mahroum 2000; Solimano and Pollack 2004), for this study, we define “highly skilled” based on educational qualifications, i.e., a university degree. As for conceptualizing “cross-border mobility,” short-term and company sponsored cross-border moves of the highly skilled have been under-recorded and have received relatively little attention from migration researchers, who have been reluctant to consider the short-term movement of people (who had no intention of settling in the destination country) as migration (Koser and Salt 1997). However, mobility patterns are becoming more complex and a wide range of individuals cross borders to work for varying periods and under different circumstances. Because a number of firms, as well as many visa and tax authorities, make a distinction between stays of less than and more than 90 days, we conceptualize cross-border mobility as “job moves” resulting in employment lasting more than three months.

The article is structured as follows. First, we briefly review the literature on cross-border mobility and discuss OE and SIE within the context of broad global dynamics. Second, we present our methodological approach and data sample. We then present findings on cross-border mobility patterns for the years 1990–2006 and discuss the implications for further research and practice, as well as the limitations.

### **Cross-border mobility of highly skilled professionals**

In the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the global mobility of the highly skilled has changed significantly as a result of globalization and global economic restructuring, suggesting it may be entering a new era (Castles and Miller 1993). These global transformations have had widespread implications for both traditionally industrialized economies (deindustrialization) and newly industrializing economies (dependency) as well as for the global mobility of the highly skilled. Most notably, there is an increased demand for advanced specialized skills in traditionally industrialized economies, especially in the service industries, which facilitates the mobility of skilled professionals from peripheral to core economies and within core economies (Sassen-Koob 1983). Furthermore, global integration processes have led to both increased interactions and growing inequalities among countries, which have affected the patterns of migration of highly skilled professionals, especially from developing to developed countries (Ong, Cheng, and Evans 1992; Cheng and Yang, 1998).

Finally, global mobility has been fostered by states (Lowell 2005) and other institutions such as multinational corporations (Collings and Scullion 2012) and institutions of outside hiring (Cappelli and Hamori 2007; Cappelli 2008) that play a crucial role in channeling, managing and recruiting highly skilled labor worldwide. Advanced economies such as Australia, Norway, Canada, the U.K., and the U.S. have developed competitive admission policies designed to attract the highly skilled (Lowell 2005). Multinational corporations have been transferring highly skilled employees, especially from corporate headquarters to overseas subsidiaries, and to a lesser extent from other locations to headquarters, as well as from one non-headquarters location to another (Harzing 2001; Millar and Salt 2008; Tungli and Peiperl 2009). Furthermore, in recent years companies have invested substantially in attracting talent worldwide (Ready et al. 2008). These dynamics have led to increased cross-border mobility of the highly skilled, especially within core economies and from peripheral to core economies (Ozden and

Schiff 2006). Additionally, global mobility appears to be increasingly short-term and serial rather than permanent (OECD 2008).

### **Organizational and self-initiated expatriation**

Within the broad context of economic integration and rising demands for highly skilled workers, two main forms of cross-border mobility can be identified. First is the mobility of OEs, who are sent on international assignments by their parent companies for coordination, control, training, and knowledge-transfer purposes (Collings and Scullion 2012). From an individual perspective, expatriate assignments are usually motivated by job and career development considerations, including the acquisition of career capital (Inkson and Arthur 2001; Dickmann and Doherty 2008), professional development opportunities (Tung 1998; Stahl, Miller, and Tung 2002; Stahl and Cerdin 2004) and career opportunities (Yan, Zhu, and Hall 2002). While traditional OE assignments make up a relatively small segment of cross-border mobility, they have received considerable attention, as indicated by the strong stream of OE literature (Takeuchi 2010; Collings and Scullion 2012). However, we know relatively little about how this form of mobility may have changed over time, especially in relation to broader mobility trends.) Furthermore, in recent years there has been an increase in “non-standard assignments,” such as commuter, rotational, contractual and extended business travel, which remain relatively unexamined (see Welch and Worm 2006; Millar and Salt 2008).

The second form is the mobility of SIEs, who move abroad of their own initiative, driven by an array of motivations such as the desire for adventure and exploration, life-change and benefit to the family (Inkson et al. 1998; Suutari and Brewster 2000; Inkson and Myers 2003; Richardson and McKenna 2006; Jokinen, Brewster, and Suutari 2008). SIE is also influenced by societal and macro-economic dynamics—first, the shift from organization-based to self-managed careers (Hall 1976; Arthur

and Rousseau 1996; Peiperl and Baruch 1997), and second, the idea of global careers as “normal” as the demand for globally competent individuals increases (Peiperl and Jonsen 2007; Thomas and Inkson 2007). Third, the development of informal migration networks facilitates connections with potential overseas employers and provides support in various forms (Massey et al. 1999; Portes 2000; Meyer 2001; Wong and Salaaf 1998). Finally, SIE is also affected by a host of other macro-level factors, including increasing demand for highly skilled workers in developed countries, changes in production chains and arrangements and transportation and communication infrastructure. Europe’s integrated labor market may have led to an increase in cross-border mobility of the highly skilled within the European Economic Area, but direct data on intra-European mobility is limited because it typically does not require a work permit. Nevertheless, indirect data suggest that cross-border mobility within the European Union is low and that a relatively limited number of individuals choose to exercise the right to work abroad (OECD 2008).

In summary, both OE and SIE are situated within a complex context of sociopolitical shifts, global/regional economic integration, and individual action. Recently, some studies have begun to examine SIE in conjunction with OE (e.g., Jokinen, Brewster, and Suutari 2008; Cerdin and Pargneux 2010; Doherty, Dickmann, and Mills 2011, Biemann and Andresen 2010; Andresen, Biemann, and Pattie 2012), but large-scale studies that track these two forms of mobility together are noticeably absent from the literature.

## **Methodology**

First, we examined patterns of geographic mobility in our dataset in order to contextualize and qualify the findings. Next, we analyzed the rate, duration, and direction (outbound, onward, and return mobility) of cross-border mobility and examined OE and SIE in detail. Finally, we compared the



demographic characteristics (age and labor force experience) of organizational and self-initiated expatriates.

## **Data**

The data for this study consist of career and educational histories of highly skilled SIEs and OEs. Our research partner—one of the largest recruitment and staffing companies in the world, with offices in over 60 countries—provided the data from seven of its country offices: Denmark, Finland, Italy, Norway, Spain, Sweden, and the U.K. All country offices offer comprehensive employment services at a variety of skill levels and across sectors, with a particular emphasis on office, factory, and IT. The company is largely European-based and derives over 60 percent of its revenues from European country offices, so the data set represents a unique opportunity to study cross-border mobility, especially within and to Europe, and contains a good representation of professional fields and countries. We should note that recruitment and staffing services companies are considered a significant “migration channel” for the highly skilled, second only to states and transnational corporations (Findlay 1990; Koser and Salt 1997).

In recent years, analysis of CV data has been used effectively to examine a wide range of issues, including the career path and mobility of highly skilled individuals (see Cañibano and Bozeman 2009 for review). Dietz and Bozeman (2005) used CV data to study career paths and job mobility of scientists and engineers in the U.S.; Cañibano, Otamendi, and Andújar (2008) used CV data to examine cross-border mobility of researchers in Europe. Nevertheless, CV-based data is not without limitations due to reporting bias, format comparability across countries and professions, and data-entry inaccuracies.

### ***Data collection process***

Close collaboration with our research partners in each country helped ensure the quality of the data and its compatibility across countries. Prior to each data extraction, we discussed the data structure and information with the local chief information officer and his or her staff, took data samples and carefully

reviewed the dataset structure. We then created a data request manual for each country, and the data were extracted according to our specifications. As a result, we received high-quality data that could be compiled and harmonized across countries.

## **Sample**

We received data on approximately 1.7 million individuals, with data from Italy (35%), Spain (20%) and the Nordic countries (40%) accounting for the majority of records. From these, we drew a sample of highly skilled individuals according to the following criteria: (1) the individual had a university education or above; (2) the individual had held one or more jobs that lasted more than three months; (3) age information was available. This yielded a sample of 380,737 highly skilled individuals who made a total of 892,531 job moves (domestic and cross-border) that lasted three months or more between 1990 and 2006.

The sample includes individuals from 175 countries of origin, with Italy and Spain accounting for 73 percent of the sample; individuals from Sweden, Norway, and the U.K. accounted for an additional 12 percent. The demographic breakdown of the sample is as follows: Average age 27.4 years; average labor force experience 3.9 years; highest education level: bachelor's degree, 34 percent; master's degree, 58 percent; doctoral degree, 8 percent. Descriptive statistics of the sample are presented in Table 1.

**[INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]**

### ***Cross-border sample***

We created a sub-sample that included only those highly skilled individuals who had made one or more cross-border job moves. This sample includes 55,915 individuals (15% of the broader sample) who made 76,660 cross-border moves (8.5% of the total number of job moves) between 1990 and 2006. Half

of these individuals made one cross-border move, 30 percent made two cross-border moves and 20 percent made three or more cross-border moves.

The cross-border sample includes individuals from 175 countries of origin: Individuals from Italy and Spain accounted for 39 percent of the sample and individuals from Argentina, the U.K., Venezuela, Colombia, Romania, and Peru accounted for an additional 20 percent. Approximately 55 percent of the individuals were from advanced economies and the rest were from peripheral economies. The demographic breakdown is: average age 28.5 years, average labor force experience 3.8 years, highest education level: bachelor's degree, 36 percent; master's degree, 58 percent; doctoral degree, 6 percent. Descriptive statistics of the cross-border sample are presented in Table 2.

**[INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]**

## **Measures**

### ***Individual-level variables***

*Education* was measured as a continuous variable, as years of schooling. Because education was the main selection criterion for the sample, we paid particular attention to ensuring its quality and consistency across national education systems and degree-granting institutions. We also considered *labor force experience*, defined as the number of months that had elapsed since the person completed school (Borjas 2003), *age*, and *country of origin*. In addition, we calculated education, labor force experience and age at or just prior to the *first* cross-border move.

### ***Cross-border mobility***

We structured the dataset longitudinally, so that each job or degree was treated as a discrete observation, constructing as complete and accurate a timeline of education, jobs, and mobility dates for

each individual as possible. Thus, we analyzed each work history as a series of jobs and consequently as a series of moves between jobs. As a first step, we determined whether a job move was *domestic* or *cross-border* through coding the geographic location of each job. For this purpose, we developed a computer-aided content analysis routine that utilized supplementary databases including names of countries, cities and commonly used geographic abbreviations in multiple languages.

### ***Organizational and self-initiated expatriation***

Each cross-border move was then analyzed in order to determine whether it was SIE or OE. For this purpose, we developed a computer-aided content analysis procedure for comparing the employer's name at  $t-1$  with that at  $t$ . If the employer names at  $t$  and  $t-1$  matched, the job move was coded as OE; if the employer names did not match, the job move was coded as SIE. We took a relatively conservative approach to name matching and consequently our data may slightly under-represent OE, but we found virtually no comparable data from external sources against which to benchmark our data.<sup>2</sup> Thus, over the timeframe studied, OE (N=892) accounted for 1 percent to 2 percent of total cross-border moves. Each OE and SIE move was further analyzed for duration and direction. Duration was measured as a continuous variable in months and as a categorical variable, distinguishing between *long-term* (at least one year) and *short-term* (at least three months, but less than a year) mobility (Solimano 2006). Because information about the direction of border crossing is essential for understanding mobility patterns (Aydemir and Robinson 2008), we distinguished among three primary directions: *outbound* (moving from country of origin or permanent residence to another country), *return* (returning to country of origin or permanent residence), and *onward* (following an outbound move with a move to a third country destination).

## Findings

We first analyzed geographic mobility, followed by an analysis of mobility rate, duration, direction, and demographic characteristics of SIE and OE.

### *Geographic mobility*

Mobility within EU-15 countries (38%), from peripheral economies to EU-15 countries (38%), and between EU-15 and other core economies (8%) accounted for the majority of the cross-border moves in our dataset. On the other hand, mobility from EU-15 to peripheral economies (12%) and between peripheral economies (4%) accounted for only 16 percent of the moves. These findings are consistent with the view that advanced economies are at the center of highly skilled mobility (Docquier and Marfouk 2006; OECD, 2008). A breakdown of geographic mobility by SIE and OE indicate that there are two main differences between these groups. First, while 31 percent of OE moves are from EU-15 to peripheral economies and within peripheral economies, only 16 percent of SIE moves are in these directions. On the other hand, only 18 percent of OE moves are from peripheral economies to EU-15 compared with 37 percent of SIE moves.

Among the countries in our data, Spain, the U.S., and the U.K. are the top destinations for OE, and Spain, Italy, and the U.K. are top destinations for SIE. We also analyzed the dominant mobility routes in our sample, i.e., paths from one specific country to another (country pairs). For SIE, the dominant routes were between the U.K. and Spain (9.5% of inter-firm moves), where an equal number of individuals moved in both directions between these two countries; between Latin America and Spain (9% of SIE), where the moves were predominantly from the Latin American countries to Spain; and between Italy and Spain (4% of SIE), where an almost equal number of individuals moved in each direction. For OE, the dominant routes were between India and the U.K. (5% of OE), where the moves were predominantly from India to the U.K., and within the Scandinavian countries (11% of OE). Although the sample is

predominantly European and cannot be considered globally representative, it is still noteworthy that similarity of language, along with historical colonial relationships, seems to play a role in these findings.

### ***Mobility rate***

We analyzed cross-border mobility in relation to domestic job mobility for the years 1990–2006.<sup>3</sup> Cross-border moves account for about 8 percent to 10 percent of total job moves; this pattern remained relatively stable throughout the timeframe under study. Figure 1 indicates that overall the growth rate of cross-border mobility largely tracks the growth rate of domestic job mobility. Figure 1 also shows a steady increase in the cross-border mobility rate during the 1990s until 2000–2001. In 2000–2001, however, there is a sharp decline in the growth rate of cross-border mobility, followed by a leveling off. This clear decrease in the growth of cross-border mobility in 2000–2001 is probably related to both the Dot-com crisis and the aftermath of the attacks of September 11, 2001 (including much stricter travel and visa restrictions).

**[INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]**

Figure 2 shows OE as a percentage of total cross-border moves. It indicates a steady increase in OE throughout the 1990s and then a more or less steady decline. This pattern suggests that while cross-border mobility experienced slower growth from 2000 onward (Figure 1) and remained steady as a percentage of total job moves, OE may actually have been in decline if we contrast it to SIE. Recent data on intra-company transfers within OECD countries also suggest that OE may be on the decline (OECD 2011).<sup>4</sup>

**[INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE]**

### *Duration*

First, we analyzed the average duration of first cross-border moves against the average duration of domestic jobs. Figure 3 shows that the duration of both steadily declined between 1990 and 2006, indicating that highly skilled individuals in the sample changed jobs more and more frequently. The duration of first cross-border moves declined from an average of 60 months in 1990 to an average of 20 months in 2006. Similarly, the average duration of SIE declined from 55 months in 1990 to 20 months in 2006 and for OE from 37 months to 20.

Figure 4 shows short-term (three to 12 months) and long-term (at least one year) moves as a percentage of total cross-border moves. In 1990, short-term moves accounted for 15 percent and long-term moves for the other 85 percent of total cross-border moves. By 2006, these figures were 55 percent and 45 percent, respectively—a significant and steady shift. This pattern holds across both SIE and OE. Taken together, these findings suggest that short-term SIE experienced the sharpest increase over the timeframe of the study. Also, while OE's relative share of total cross-border moves has been on the decline, this decline is more pronounced when it comes to long-term OE. These findings are consistent with a recent industry report (Brookfield, 2012) that suggests traditional company-sponsored long-term relocation is gradually giving way to other forms of global mobility, especially short-term assignments.

**[INSERT FIGURES 3 AND 4 ABOUT HERE]**

### *Direction*

Figure 5 shows the geographic direction—outbound, return, and onward—of cross-border moves between 1990 and 2006. As expected, outbound moves occurred more frequently, accounting for 75

percent of total cross-border moves. However, the relative share of outbound and return moves has been declining while that of onward moves has increased. Again, this pattern holds across both SIE and OE. These patterns suggest that individuals are increasingly engaging in serial mobility, moving on to further locations.

**[INSERT FIGURE 5 ABOUT HERE]**

### *Demographic characteristics*

On average, at the time of their first cross-border move, individuals were 28 years old and had 16 years of schooling (bachelor's degree). Prior to their first cross-border move, on average, these individuals had 30 months of labor force experience. Figure 6 shows that younger individuals moved across borders far more than older ones (notwithstanding the relatively young average age of the sample). Worth noting is that from 1990 to 1998, age at the first cross-border move was declining and then began to go up slightly. A slightly different pattern is observed with regard to labor force experience prior to the first cross-border move: It steadily declined from an average of 47 months in 1990 to an average of 23 months in 2006. On the other hand, the average level of education at the first cross-border move was on the increase until 2002, when it began to decline.

**[INSERT FIGURE 6 ABOUT HERE]**

We compared the demographic characteristics of individuals at the time they engaged in SIE and OE using a series of two-sample t-tests, which adjust for the unequal size of these two groups. These analyses reveal the following: First, individuals who engage in SIE tend to be younger ( $t(76,558) =$



6.27,  $p = .01$ ), slightly less educated ( $t(76,558) = 3.31$ ,  $p = .01$ ) and have fewer years of labor force experience ( $t(76,558) = 9.04$ ,  $p = .01$ ) compared to individuals who engage in OE, and these differences are statistically significant. These results are consistent with previous studies that found self-initiated expatriates to be younger and less experienced (Suutari and Brewster 2000; Cerdin and Pargneux 2010).

Second, individuals who engage in short-term mobility are significantly younger ( $t(76,558) = 23.7$ ,  $p = .01$ ) and have fewer years of labor force experience ( $t(76,558) = 22.79$ ,  $p = .01$ ) than those who engage in long-term mobility, and these differences hold for both SIE and OE. On the other hand, we did not find statistically significant differences in the level of education between those in short-term and long-term assignments. Third, individuals who engaged in SIE outbound mobility had significantly less labor force experience than those who did so in OE ( $t(54,689) = 5.99$ ,  $p = .01$ ). These differences persist also in onward mobility: Individuals who engaged in SIE onward ( $t(16,459) = 5.85$ ,  $p = .01$ ) mobility had significantly less labor force experience than those in OE.

## Discussion

To contextualize and qualify our findings, we first considered patterns of mobility by origin and destination. While the conventional wisdom is that mobility of the highly skilled is centred on advanced economies, there are no definitive statistics on the relative share of advanced economies vs. peripheral economies as origin and destination countries. The composition of our sample is about evenly split between individuals from advanced economies, especially EU-15 countries, and those from peripheral economies, enabling us to offer evidence about both groups. Advanced economies, especially Italy, Spain, and the U.K., are the primary destination countries in our sample and may, therefore, be overrepresented. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the majority of individuals from *both* advanced and peripheral economies have moved to advanced economies whereas only 20 percent have moved to

peripheral economies. Thus, perhaps unsurprisingly, advanced economies appear to be the prime beneficiaries of mobility of the highly skilled.

Second, we examined the cross-border mobility rate in relation to domestic job mobility. While these are distinct phenomena, they are both linked to societal dynamism and globalization. We found a steady increase in the cross-border mobility rate during the 1990s, then a sharp decline in 2000–2001, followed by a leveling off. However, we also found that, overall, the growth rate of cross-border mobility largely tracks the growth rate of domestic job mobility in Europe. These findings both confirm and contradict the received wisdom on cross-border mobility. On the one hand, the rate of cross-border mobility increased during the 1990s, as predicated by globalization theories that suggested that labor markets were expected to become more globalized and human capital more globally mobile (Johnston, 1991). On the other hand, the finding that cross-border mobility grew at a rate that largely tracked the general growth rate of domestic job mobility suggests that while labor markets in Europe became more dynamic and highly skilled individuals more mobile (changing jobs more frequently), these dynamics were not especially pronounced on an international scale. In other words, we have indeed witnessed a general increase in cross-border mobility, but this increase has not exceeded the growth in domestic labor mobility in Europe.

Our study also indicates that cross-border mobility may have become more short-term and serial. Half of the individuals in our sample have made two or more cross-border moves and short term mobility seems to be increasing significantly. The average duration of first cross-border moves has steadily declined from an average of 60 months in 1990 to an average of 20 months in 2006, indicating that cross-border mobility has become more transient (as have domestic jobs). By 2006, short-term moves accounted for over a half of cross-border moves compared to 15 percent in 1996. Furthermore, an

increasing number of individuals seem to be moving to another country after their initial move rather than returning home.

### ***Comparing self-initiated and organizational expatriation***

In considering the similarities and differences between self-initiated and organizational expatriates, we found that SIEs in our study tend to be younger, slightly less educated, and have fewer years of labor force experience compared to OEs, which is consistent with previous research (Suutari and Brewster 2000; Cerdin and Pargneux 2010). It appears that a generation of qualified graduates is gaining global experience, independent of company control or sponsorship, early in their careers; hence, our study supports the idea that a globally connected “Internet generation” is prepared to live out its connectedness by crossing borders (Tulgan and Martin, 2001).

Our research also reveals some important differences with regard to geographic mobility. First, peripheral economies are the destination of about one-third of the organizational moves, whereas only one-sixth of the self-initiated moves are in this direction. Furthermore, less than one-fifth of OE moves are from peripheral to advanced economies compared with over one-third of SIE moves. These findings indicate that OEs are more likely than SIEs to move to peripheral economies whereas SIEs are more likely than OEs to move from peripheral to advanced economies. SIEs are likely more influenced by the relative labour market conditions of the destination country, moving where conditions offer greater economic prospects (Globerman and Shapiro 2009). OEs are more likely asked to go by companies that facilitate their moves to less developed countries and support them while there.

Compared to the growth in self-initiated mobility, whose scale and growth appear more significant than previously recognized (Suutari and Brewster 2000; OECD 2008; 2011) we found some evidence that organizational expatriation may be on the decline. SIEs, on the other hand, constitute a significant

but under-tapped pool of highly skilled potential employees for firms; thus, they should receive more attention in organizational studies (Jokinen et al. 2008).

The apparent decline in OE likely reflects several underlying trends. First, the declining significance of multinational corporations in *managing* the global careers of highly skilled professionals, not unlike their declining significance in managing “domestic” careers (Arthur and Rousseau 1996), has led to difficulties in transferring their employees across certain borders (European Commission, 2010).<sup>5,6</sup> Second, the decline in individual *expectations* of organization-based careers, and the rise of temporary, flexible or contract labor arrangements, has resulted in the “normalization” of highly skilled professionals seeking cross-border mobility independent of their existing employer. Third, the growing significance of qualification-based immigration policies has created opportunities for highly skilled individuals in developed countries (Chaloff and Lemaître 2009).

Contrary to previous studies that found SIEs tend to stay longer (Inkson and Myers 2003; Richardson and Mallon 2005), we did not find significant differences between OEs and SIEs, whose average duration of stay had declined to 20 months by 2006. We further found that short-term moves tended to be common among SIEs while long-term OE moves were on the decline.

In summary, we saw a steady increase in domestic job mobility over the period of the sample, with cross-border mobility keeping pace. Both SIEs and OEs seem to have become more short-term. Finally, the traditional long-term OE may be on the decline in relation to other forms of mobility, particularly to and from the EU.

### ***Limitations***

A general limitation of this study is the focus on advanced European economies; it therefore cannot be considered globally representative. However, it enabled us to analyze the mobility of a large number

of skilled professionals from both advanced and peripheral economies over time and across geographies. Given the fact that advanced economies are usually the primary destination of skilled workers, our findings can shed light on significant changes and trends in cross-border mobility.

The data is also not entirely free from sampling bias and (because of the large, multi-source sample) coding errors. However, it illustrates a novel and promising approach for future research on mobility. The challenges posed in cleaning and coding millions of records are massive, but the potential relationships uncovered by the CV and work-history data merit the effort. We believe this individual-based, data-rich approach to research with micro- and macro-level implications will likely become the norm in the field of cross-border career mobility.

## **Conclusion**

As the first study to track a large number of self-initiated and company-backed expatriates over time and highlight the distinct differences between these two groups, this article makes a significant contribution—not least because of the dearth of data and analysis on self-initiated international work experience (Inkson et al. 1997) and the relatively limited number of comparative studies. Thus, as self-initiated mobility is a widespread and significant phenomenon (Brewster and Suutari, 2005), global career research needs to be expanded beyond the traditional focus on organizational expatriates.

Finally, this study supports earlier research suggesting that career self-determination, rather than long-term organizational careers, may be the rule (e.g., Arthur and Rousseau, 1996; Peiperl and Baruch, 1997). This is reflected both in the decreasing amount of time individuals stay in one job and in the increasing rate at which they move across firms rather than within them.

Many multinational firms identify “development of globally skilled executives” as one of their biggest challenges and “retention of talent” as another. Yet our results suggest that, more often than not,

individuals experience more “global development” by leaving their current employer than by staying with them. The irony is apparent—viewed from the employer’s point of view, successful retention appears to imply less global development and vice-versa. What, then, should HR and talent managers do?

First, they need to take higher employee turnover as a given because this is likely how their future employees view the world. They need to recruit everywhere there is a need, without depending on expatriation or other processes of intra-firm mobility. At the same time, firms need to move talent between jobs and across borders faster—but not on expensive packages or with any guarantees. Instead, they should seek out those among their skilled employees who are already motivated to cross borders and help them do so.

For individuals, the evidence suggests they are more likely to develop global careers if they do not depend on any single employer to help them. It also suggests that looking for opportunities to “see the world” while relatively young is more likely to lead to international experience than waiting until they are more experienced. Finally, changing jobs, even in rapid succession, may carry less of a stigma than it once did, freeing individuals to seek more opportunities and take advantage of those that come along unexpectedly.

Global mobility has developed significantly over the last generation. Working at an academic institute whose primary constituents are global businesses, we are constantly reminded by our learning partners of the challenges of managing talent globally—in particular, either finding needed skills in specific markets or moving people with particular skills across borders. By the same token, we often find individual students or executive participants on our programs considering (or reconsidering) their own global mobility. The more we can discover about the forces driving actual mobility (or immobility) and the patterns of mobility among the highly skilled, the better we, and others, can advise both

individuals and organizations on this complex and important topic.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In fact, the most recent evidence suggests that mobility of the highly skilled mainly occurs between developed countries (or OECD economies) and it is estimated that 90 percent of highly skilled migrants live inside the 30-country OECD area (Ozden and Schiff, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Other research estimating OE using data such as intra-corporate transfer permits (working visas) also often under-represent this type of mobility, especially within the European Union where no working visa is typically required (OECD, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Our domestic job mobility data are also largely European (86% of the records) and provide an adequate baseline against which to compare cross-border mobility rates.

<sup>4</sup> We should note that these statistics are not specific to the highly skilled. Furthermore, statistics for European OECD countries do not include transfers within the European Economic Area, for which no data are available.

<sup>5</sup> In fact, these obstacles are deemed significant enough that the European Parliament has recently put forward a proposal on the conditions of entry and residence of third-country nationals in the framework of intra-corporate transfers in order to facilitate such transfers (European Commission, 2010).

<sup>6</sup> However, as we have suggested earlier, our data may underrepresent organizational expatriation; therefore, these findings should be interpreted with caution.